

**MONTREAL INSTITUTE  
FOR GENOCIDE STUDIES**

**Occasional Papers**

---

**Introducing Genocide into the  
University Curriculum**

by

**Frank Chalk**

---

© Frank Chalk, June 1991

**Concordia University  
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West  
Montréal, Québec  
Canada H3G 1M8**

# INTRODUCING GENOCIDE INTO THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

by

Dr. Frank Chalk  
Department of History  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec  
Canada H3G 1M8

## I. The Beginning of Our Work on Genocide

Eleven years ago, Kurt Jonassohn, a sociologist at Concordia University, sat down to have a cup of coffee with me and changed the direction of my professional career. "Why is it," he asked, "that our university has no courses on a subject as vital as the history and sociology of genocide." Neither of us could explain the neglect of the problem of genocide in the curriculum, but we arose from our discussion determined to design and to introduce such a course as swiftly as possible.

Our agreement to collaborate sprang from a shared legacy. Both of us are Jews who lost relatives to genocide. Kurt comes from Cologne. Early in the Second World War, the Germans deported his parents to the Lodz Ghetto; in 1942, they murdered them. I am the son of a Jew who emigrated from Lodz in 1912. In 1920, my father came to the United States by way of Great Britain. During the Holocaust, many members of my father's family died in the ghettos, death camps, and gas chambers of Poland.

There are many possible approaches to designing a university course on genocide. Genocide can be introduced as part of the study of world history or Western civilization.

It can be studied through an intensive examination of a small number of genocides. It can be approached comparatively and throughout history in a survey course that includes many cases and themes. And, when we have learned enough to develop significant generalizations about past genocides and their roots, it will become feasible to offer courses based on major themes in the history of genocide.

Kurt was insistent from the very beginning of our collaborative enterprise that the Concordia course not focus exclusively on the Holocaust and I agreed. Our aim was to examine genocide comparatively, and from its earliest beginnings in human history down to the present. Aided by grants from our academic deans, and helped by many colleagues at Concordia and other universities, we spent the 1979-1980 academic year building up our case materials and debating the pros and cons of various definitions of genocide. We were helped enormously in these tasks by the willingness of Norman Cohn, the author of The Pursuit of the Millennium, Europe's Inner Demons, and Warrant for Genocide, to spend 13 weeks with us in each of two consecutive years as a visiting scholar at Concordia and by his aid in mounting an inter-university faculty seminar on mass killing in history.

## II. A Definition and Typology of Genocide

Eventually, we came to the view that our course required a new definition of genocide that included political and social groups, as well as the racial, religious, national and ethnic



groups covered by the United Nations definition. We restricted our definition of acts that constituted genocide to the killing of members of the group or to deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction. After working with many permutations of our definition, we concluded that:

GENOCIDE is a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator.<sup>1</sup>

We have also developed a typology of genocide which classifies genocides according to the motive of the perpetrator. The categories in our typology are:

1. Genocides to eliminate a real or potential threat;
2. Genocides to spread terror among real or potential enemies;
3. Genocides to acquire economic wealth; and
4. Genocides to implement a belief, a theory, or an ideology.

Since in actual cases more than one of these motives will be present, we assign each case of genocide to one of these types by deciding which of these motives was the dominant

one.<sup>2</sup> Types 1, 2 and 3 are utilitarian genocides, which distinguishes them from the ideologically-motivated genocides of type 4.

### III. Our Students

In 1980, we offered the course for the first time, joined by 25 undergraduates brave enough to risk taking an experimental two-semester course that forced them to face TWO professors in each meeting of the class. In the early years, Kurt and I frequently argued with each other in class about particular cases. We made no effort to paper over our differences since we assumed that our students might learn something from them. Many students told us later that those discussions were one of the high points of their year. Our disagreements were disconcerting for a few students who only wanted to hear the conclusions that we agreed on so they would know the "right" answers for their exams and research papers. (Although Kurt and I have detected an alarming drift towards consensus over the past few years, we still have enough disagreements to keep our class meetings interesting. We also keep our students on their toes by submitting for class discussions a number of views with which we disagree.)

Over the past decade, enrollment in the class has grown steadily. We now accept 70 students per year, a ceiling we set to facilitate participation, and the Registrar's Office turns away students when that number is reached. Whenever

possible, we also admit auditors to the class. Many of these are faculty colleagues and relatives or friends of our students. Our own departments, History and Sociology, have reached the conclusion that the "History and Sociology of Genocide" merits a regular place in the curriculum. The University has responded by listing the course as one of its regular offerings.

Our students come from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Concordia has a large number of evening classes and we have always offered the course at night because we find many of our most interesting students among the older enrollees. Each year a few members of our class are survivors of the Holocaust or their children and individuals who come from families that have survived other genocides. Among this last group are the children and grandchildren of those who witnessed genocides in Turkey and the Ukraine. Most of our students, however, are young people with no family legacy of genocide. These young people take the course principally because they see genocide as the greatest example of evil in their universe. Although their families have not been touched directly by genocide, they are anxious to learn about its causes and how it can be deterred. They care deeply about human rights and they are worried about the capacity of human beings to do evil as well as good.



#### IV. The Design of Our Course

One of our first aims was to teach the students the value of thinking through the differences between genocide and other man-made disasters, a concern which led us to emphasize the characteristics that make genocide unique. After a few false starts, we realized that several weeks on alternative definitions and typologies of genocide was the worst possible way to begin the course. The students simply gnashed their teeth in frustration over the dry definitions. What they needed before they could weigh and compare concepts were historical data on particular cases of genocide.

Our course meets for 26 weeks and it is divided into five major parts:

- I. Early Utilitarian Genocides (6 weeks)
- II. The Transition to Ideologically-Motivated Genocides (3 weeks)
- III. Ideologically-Motivated Genocides from 1915 to 1945 (6 weeks)
- IV. Genocide after World War II (6 weeks)
- V. Predicting, Preventing and Labelling Genocides (3 weeks).

We now start with one week on definitions and typologies, followed by six weeks on concrete instances of early utilitarian genocides drawn from the history of the Ancient

Near East, the Athenian and Roman Empires, the Mongol Empire, the Indians of the Americas, the Zulu Empire, Tasmania, and German South West Africa. This approach offers three key advantages: (1) it introduces the students to the utilitarian motives of the perpetrators of the earliest genocides; (2) it helps them to see the great importance of genocides in empire-building; and (3) it equips them with contrasting cases for their first forays into the transition from utilitarian to ideological genocides.

After one further week dedicated to consolidating the students' understanding of the utilitarian aims of the first genocides, we devote two weeks to our transition cases: the crusade against the Cathars, the Spanish Inquisition, the Great Witch-Hunt, and the annihilation of Christians in Tokugawa Japan. Strictly speaking, the Inquisitors and the Witch-Hunters were not perpetrators of genocide, but we feel it is very important for the class to examine those cases in which European states and regimes accepted confessions under torture and established guilt by association, practices that are crucial to many genocides of the twentieth century.

The role of revolutionary ideologies in the great mass killings of the twentieth century is a vital component of our course. After five weeks on the early utilitarian genocides and three weeks on transitional cases, we devote six weeks to an examination of the ideologically-motivated genocides of the years from 1915 to 1945: the Turkish genocide against the



Armenian people, the genocides committed in the Soviet Union, and the Holocaust. The Armenian genocide and its antecedents in Ottoman history introduce or reinforce a number of key aspects of ideologically-motivated genocides:

- (1) the vulnerability of minority modernizing groups such as the Armenians in Turkey;
- (2) the propensity of new states and regimes to resort to genocide as a means of consolidating their rule;
- (3) the tendency of extreme nationalists to seek the destruction of other cultures in nation-states;
- (4) the refusal of the perpetrators to count the cost to their own societies in lives and national progress of their attempts to destroy an entire people;
- (5) the general rule that most states which have committed genocide deny it; and, a corollary of the last point,
- (6) that states which refuse to recognize their genocides are implicitly reinforcing hostility to the victim group and are keeping open their option to strike again.

Our students examine the Armenian genocide through the

essays of Richard Hovannisian, Robert Melson, and Leo Kuper. We have also been very fortunate over the years in securing lectures for the class by Kerop Bedoukian (a survivor of the genocide of 1915 and the author of The Urchin); Gerard Chaliand; Yves Ternon; Roger Smith; Gerard Libaridian; Leo Kuper; Helen Fein, and Richard Hovannisian. With this kind of stimulation, it is not surprising that many of our students have written research papers on the Armenian genocide. Their studies include essays on the role of Pan-Turkic ideology; the part played by the Great Powers before, during, and after the genocide; the attempt to bring the perpetrators of the genocide to justice for committing crimes against humanity; and the Turkish Government's continuing denial that the Armenian genocide ever happened.

There are many fine secondary sources for the students' research papers, but we prefer that they concentrate on sources that originated at the time of the genocide--government documents, newspapers, diaries and letters, in so far as they are in an accessible language--because primary sources are the best introduction to the events and the feel of another time and place. The forthcoming Chadwyck-Healey microfiche edition of the American documents on the Armenian Genocide deposited in the United States National Archives and the Library of Congress will greatly facilitate this type of research by our students.

From the Armenian Genocide, we move to the genocides

committed by the U.S.S.R. Here the students must contend with the complexities of the man-made Ukrainian Famine, Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930's, and his annihilatory deportations of various ethnic groups during and after the Second World War. These cases compel careful reflection by the students on the perpetrator's advantage in holding the exclusive right to define the identity and the boundaries of a victim group and to consign human beings to membership in a group for the purpose of annihilating its supposed members. The underlying genocidal function of group labels such as "class enemies," "kulaks," "enemies of the people," and "traitors" is carefully examined in this discussion.

Students in our course come to the study of the Holocaust well prepared to see its unique and its universal elements in the history of genocide. Our treatment emphasizes that the Holocaust was the most carefully conceived, the most thoroughly implemented, and the most fully realized case of ideologically-motivated genocide in history and that it represents a type of genocide that is characteristic of aberrant quests for a "perfected" society in our time.<sup>3</sup> The uniqueness of the Holocaust, as we see it, rests on several of its features, including:

- (1) Hitler's biological definition of the Jews as the members of a race and his insistence that the Jewish race must perish immediately in order to save the



Germans and the rest of the Aryan race from racial pollution and death;

(2) the bureaucratic and scientific tools of annihilation employed by the perpetrator--an array of the most advanced administrative, scientific, and industrial weapons of their time, incorporated in a program specifically designed to insure the complete and immediate biological destruction of the Jewish people; and

(3) the unique challenge from within which the Holocaust presents for Western society and our image of the values for which it stands, a challenge which flows directly from the fact that the Jews and the Romanies were murdered in post-Enlightenment Europe by Germans--one of the most scientifically and industrially advanced peoples of Europe, citizens of a nation steeped in Western culture.

The next six weeks of our course are devoted to genocides that occurred after World War Two. We examine the genocides in the People's Republic of China, Tibet, Cambodia (or Kampuchea), Indonesia, East Timor, Burundi, Equatorial Guinea, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia. Each of these cases reinforces our earlier emphasis on the importance of the

perpetrator's power to choose the definitional boundaries of the victim group. The case of Cambodia is particularly important since it vividly exemplifies how social variables such as educational level, class, previous employment and residence could have sentenced hundreds of thousands of human beings to death under Pol Pot's regime. We also examine the narrow escape from genocide by Ibos in Nigeria and Baha'is in Iran, countries that barely stepped back from the abyss of genocide.

The last three weeks of our course are devoted to sessions on the prediction of genocide, prevention, labelling and a critical review of definitions and typologies of genocide. We ask the students to join us in identifying the signals that may warn of an imminent genocide, we examine the difficulties of mobilizing governments and the United Nations to deter genocides or to stop them once they are underway, and we discuss the potential for alternative strategies of rescue based on non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International, Cultural Survival, International Alert, and the Minority Rights Group. This is one of the most important and one of the most engrossing parts of the course. By this time, the students have a keen notion of the meaning of genocide and they have developed criteria which will help them to identify and fight it in the years ahead.

## V. Conclusion

Yale University Press published our book on the history and sociology of genocide in the Spring of 1990. We hope that its appearance will make it possible for more teachers to introduce courses that examine genocide in a comparative historical perspective. Such university courses would complement the pioneering work that is being done at the high school level by the innovators from "Facing History and Ourselves" and by the California State Department of Education.

The twentieth century has truly and tragically been an age of genocide. Now is the best time for colleges and universities to take up that challenge and thus contribute to a better future for all peoples. Our experience at Concordia University shows clearly that today's students have the courage to study genocide if only more professors can find the will to teach about it.



ENDNOTES

1. For a detailed explanation of the terms of this definition, see part I of our book, The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
2. For a discussion of the categories in our typology and the cases included in it, see Parts I and II of ibid.
3. We use the term "perfected" future in the form elaborated by Norman Cohen in The Pursuit of the Millennium, revised and expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970; original ed. 1957) and Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, 3rd ed. (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981; original ed. 1967).

## APPENDIX I

### TEXTS FOR THE HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY OF GENOCIDE

Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Leo Kuper, Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Leo Kuper, International Action Against Genocide. Report No. 53 London: Minority Rights Group, Revised 1984 edition.

Margot Northey and Lorne Tepperman. Making Sense in the Social Sciences: A Student's Guide to Research, Writing, and Style. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986 (This is included to assist students with format, style, and documentation).

#### Recommended Reading

Norman Cohn, Warrant for Genocide. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981 (Reprint of 1967 edition).

Helen Fein, "Scenarios of Genocide: Models of Genocide and Critical Responses" in Toward the Understanding and Prevention of Genocide, ed. Israel Charny. Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1984.

### The Evaluation of Student Work

The weighting of grades in the course is distributed as follows:

50% for exams and assignments

50% for the research paper

### THE HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY OF GENOCIDE--COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1	<u>Introduction; Definitions; the Research Paper; the Library; Take-Home Exams</u>
Week 2	<u>Definitions and Typologies</u>
Week 3	<u>The Ancient Near East</u>
Week 4	<u>Greece; Rome and Carthage</u>
Week 5	<u>The Mongols</u>
Week 6	<u>The Zulus under Shaka; The Hereros</u>
Week 7	<u>Indians of the Americas to 1900; The Tasmanians</u>
Week 8	<u>The Transition to Ideological Genocide</u>
Week 9	<u>The Albigensian Crusade; The Spanish Inquisition</u>
Week 10	<u>The Great Witch-Hunt; Christians in Tokugawa Japan</u>
Weeks 11+12	<u>The Armenians</u>
Week 13	Open date for visiting speaker during semester.
Weeks 14+15	<u>The U.S.S.R.</u>
Weeks 16+17	<u>The Holocaust</u>
Week 18	<u>Genocide since World War II</u>



Week 19	<u>The People's Republic of China; Tibet; Kampuchea (Cambodia)</u>
Week 20	<u>The Indonesian Coup; East Timor</u>
Week 21	<u>Burundi; Equatorial Guinea; Nigeria</u>
Week 22	<u>Bangladesh; Iran</u>
Week 23	<u>Ethiopia; Liberia; Sudan</u>
Weeks 24+25	<u>Prediction of Genocide; Prevention; Labelling</u>
Week 26	<u>A Critical Review of Definitions and Typologies of Genocide</u>